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The "Unfinished Business" of Kill Bill: Cinematic Discourse In and Out of the Dark

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Abstract
Tarantino offers in *Kill Bill* a unique synthesis of a diverse set of films and film histories that, if understood in the communal, religious sense Margaret Miles describes in her book *Seeing and Believing*, could initiate creative reflection about his film and the often indiscernible set of cultural and filmic influences it contains. The present paper demonstrates the utility of a religious understanding of Tarantino's film be discussing the narrative and stylistic elements in the film that compromise the film's own violence and initiate the types of critical discussions Miles champions in her book.

Irish filmmaker and critic Maximilian Le Cain contends that the final scenes between the Bride (Uma Thurman) and Bill (David Carradin) in Quentin Tarantino's two volume film *Kill Bill* are so badly conceived that they interrupt what would otherwise be one of the "most intelligent, unique and exciting films to have come out of the Hollywood mainstream" in over a decade.[1] Le Cain finds two faults with *Kill Bill*'s ending, one narrative and the other stylistic. In terms of narrative, Le Cain claims the film fails to reach the apex the narrative arc of the film travels. Tarantino creates in *Kill Bill* the first opportunity for "a new domestic ideal" to emerge, one with the "the ethos of action cinema at its center."[2] For this to happen, the Bride must forgo her vengeful intentions and reunite with Bill. Together, Bill and the Bride could allow the extremes of violent cinema "not only to coexist with the tenets of a loving household, but to be integral in them."[3] Bill's death disrupts this possibility.

Stylistically, Le Cain claims that the finale's over-commitment to dialogue abandons the mythological, iconic realm in which the majority of the film exists. In Le Cain's estimation, Bill and the Bride over-emphasize and over-explain each and every nuance of the film already succinctly delivered in the preceding images. Le Cain takes particular offense at Bill's "embarrassing, pseudo-philosophical dissertation on Superman comics," contending that the film has already removed the heroes from actual life and elevated them to the level of cinematic superhero.[4]

Audiences do not need Bill's verbose jabber to articulate this. These discussions compromise the ability of the film to exist in the pure cinematic space Le Cain contends Tarantino must want the film to exist. I offer that rather than disrupt the film these conversations initiate reflection and discourse of both Kill Bill and the particular history of film Kill Bill synthesizes and in so doing moves the film from the cinematic space it naturally inhibits to a place of cultural dialogue that Margaret R. Miles concludes *Seeing and Believing* (1996) suggesting films beg to exist.[5]

Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films have certainly initiated discussion since their two-part release. The consensus on the two films is nearly unequivocal: volume one is something of a "wet kiss to kung fu" possessing all of Tarantino's "fetishes for ultraviolence";[6] volume two becomes more reflective, more willing to examine relationships and rationales.[7] Most critics agree that taken together, the two films form a "masterful saga" able to "celebrate the genres from which [they] borrow while kidding, loving, and transcending them at the same time."[8] In addition to these summative comments, discussion over the films has championed the surprising familial values in the films and detailed the rich cinematic and pop-cultural history from which they draw. These discussions are interesting to be sure, but because they cast *Kill Bill* as something intensely personal for Tarantino, as a chance for Tarantino to live vicariously through the films he loved as a child. While *Kill Bill* may, indeed, serve some personal desire to revisit and recreate films that

Tarantino loved as a child as some have charged, to frame critical discussions in this way ensures that the more interesting cultural significance of these films be missed.[9] Tarantino offers in *Kill Bill* a unique synthesis of a diverse set of films and film histories that, if understood in a communal, religious sense, could initiate creative reflection about not just the two volumes of the film but of a normally indiscernible set of cultural and filmic influences as well.

To support this type of discussion, one does well to adopt the definition of religion that Miles articulates in *Seeing and Believing*. She claims that religion is most simply "a sense of relatedness" that is able to "provide a picture of the greater whole in which all living things are related."[10] This sense of relatedness organizes every social arrangement and suggests the attitudes and actions of every person implicated in its network of relations. By adopting this definition of religion, one can identify the filmic and social references in *Kill Bill* as more than just nods to films, directors, or traditions Tarantino wants to celebrate. The two volume film becomes the overt articulation of one of the most pervasive religions in contemporary culture and a depiction of this religions commitment to reciprocal violence. To appreciate this function of the film most fully, one would do well to notice, first, the ways in which Tarantino establish his synthesis of film history and, then, the narrative and stylistic choices made to ensure that the audience thinks critically about the violence in the film.

One way in which Tarantino creates a synthesis of film history in *Kill Bill* is through his casting. A number of the actors in *Kill Bill* have distinct film identities before appearing in Tarantino's film. David Carradine, for instance, is most widely recognized for playing in B-movie martial art films of the 1970's and in the early 1970's television series *Kung Fu*. Sonny Chiba (Hattori Hanzo) is one of the first martial arts experts to reach star status through acting, earning the title of Japanese martial arts actor in international cinema during the 1970's and 1980's. Gordon Liu (Johnny Mo/*Pai Mei*) has similar global prominence as a Chinese martial arts actor, appearing in films and television programs consistently during the last thirty years. Even some of the younger stars selected bear distinct film identities. Chiaki Kuriyama (Gogo Yubari) created a strong following in Japan after starring in Fukasaku's *Battle Royale*, a film so violent that it forced Japan to change its rating system. Tarantino relies on each of these identifications in ways that very few directors have, selecting actors because of their pre-existing persona. These personas, when used as Tarantino uses them, not only enrich *Kill Bill* but they help situate the film within a place of reference in which attitudes toward characters and their actions are formed before they appear on screen. In this way, the actors on the screen produce a network of relations that allows the film to perform one of the most prominent functions of religion.

Casting is just one of the ways Tarantino synthesizes a diverse film history in *Kill Bill*. Tarantino further implicates his film within a history of film by borrowing from a number of different genres. Initially, *Kill Bill* most resembles a samurai film. Elements from a number of other genres emerge quickly and consistently, though, making the assignment of this film to one genre impossible. For instance, Vernita Green's (Vivica A. Fox) presence in the early moments of the film alludes to the blaxploitation films of the 1970's. Later in the first volume, Tarantino chooses to relate O-Ren Ishii's (Lucy Liu) back-story through Japanese anime. This type of genre mixing continues in volume two. Budd's (Michael Madsen) character and his actions against the Bride (Uma Thurman) follow the characterization and pattern of Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns; the Bride's eventual emergence from her grave is reminiscent of a zombie film. This collection of genres situates *Kill Bill* within a specific filmic tradition and in so doing exposes the ways in which film establishes the network of connections Miles affords religion.

In *Kill Bill*, Tarantino does more than just reveal the religious function of film; he also presents the most prominent value of this religion: the story of a person wronged who makes that wrong right through a more efficient and effective violence against her assailants. Each of the genres represented in *Kill Bill* finds at their center characters that respond to violence with increased violence. While

certainly doing little to overtly minimize the righteousness with which the Bride exacts her revenge, Tarantino does inject his story with narrative and stylistic devices that disrupt passive spectatorship and beg for reflection over this response. The two most prominent ways in which Tarantino implores his audience to scrutinize the tale at the center of his film is his non-linear presentation of the Bride's quest for revenge and the use of flashbacks. Both elements complicate audience perception of the film and disrupt the Bride's definitive view of her victims.

For audiences to accept the Bride's actions without question they would have to adopt the Bride's perception of the events and the characters involved in this event. On the surface, Tarantino seems to present his story from the Bride's perception and according to her progression. Tarantino's flashbacks complicate the Bride's story, however, and provide audiences the opportunity for discussion. By way of example, one would do well to consider the flashback that appears when the Bride first sees Vernita Green. The person who answers the Bride's knock is a pedestrian suburbanite against whom the coming violence would be untenable. This image is quickly dismissed through use of a flashback that implicates Green in the horrendous act committed against the Bride at the film's opening. The sequence at the door of Green's Pasadena home concludes with a double exposed image of the present-day Bride and an image of the unmarred Green standing over the assaulted

Bride's body. The extent to which audiences accept the violence against Green that will follow depends on the degree to which the audience sees the unmarred and assaulted Bride. Audiences might choose to accept the murderous Green the Bride sees, but the fact that Tarantino gives them a choice at least complicates this choice. Either way, Tarantino's flashback opens the space for critical dialogue over the Bride's actions.

Tarantino frustrates the likelihood that audiences accept the Bride's actions against Green in a second, more troublesome manner. By beginning volume one proper with the Bride's vengeful act against Green rather than follow her tale chronologically, Tarantino demonstrates the ways in which the roles assigned in the act of reciprocal violence fluctuate. The Bride's tale begins in the chapel when she is assaulted by Bill and the rest of the Deadly Vipers. The assailants will eventually die at the hands of the Bride, understood in this tale to be the righteous avenger. Her actions will, at the same time, implicate her in new cycles of violence, ones in which she will not be the righteous avenger but the one against whom the violence must be exacted. This fluctuation is the most vital aspect of the film's initial chapter. As the Bride pulls the knife from Green's chest and rises from her dead body, Tarantino places within the cinematic space first occupied by the Bride, Green's daughter, Nikki (Ambrosia Kelly). Nikki fills the Bride's space as a direct consequence of the Bride's actions against Nikki's mother. The Bride, of course,

understands all of this, even articulates the logic of reciprocal violence to the young girl. By placing this fluctuation in the roles of reciprocal violence and an overt discussion of this phenomenon at the beginning of the film, Tarantino complicates the Bride's tale of revenge from the beginning. The audience is able to see clearly that a vengeance satisfied can only create the need for more violence.

Tarantino further maximizes the effect of this insight by moving the Bride's conflict with O-Ren Ishii to the end of volume one. O-Ren's life in the film begins with the need for reciprocal violence in the same way the Bride's does. O-Ren witnesses the murder of her parents and seeks her revenge as soon as she can. The most interesting part of O-Ren's story is not the fact that she gets her revenge, but that she eventually participates in the action against the Bride, which spawns a new cycle of violence that will ultimately result in her death. The presentation of O-Ren's demise at the end of volume one concludes both O-Ren's participation in the cycle of reciprocal violence and projects the Bride's own end, presumably at the hands of the child wronged at the opening of the film. In this way, Tarantino structures *Kill Bill* volume one around the three stages of reciprocal violence (the original act that begins the cycle, the implication in a new cycle of reciprocal violence, and the retributive demise at the hands of the person wronged in this new cycle of violence). Were Tarantino to present the events that follow the Bride's quest for revenge in a traditional, linear manner, critique of the Bride's actions

would prove difficult. Her cause would be accepted without hesitation and the possibility for creative discussion would be greatly minimized. In choosing to begin *Kill Bill*, volume one, with an account of the Bride's confrontation with Green and to end it with O-Ren, Tarantino demonstrates the volatility inherent in the assignment of righteous avengers and deserving victims within the cycle of violence, which can only compromise the supposed commitment to the violence Tarantino is often thought to celebrate.

It should come as no surprise that *Kill Bill*'s second volume refuses to offer an additional serving of the over-stylized, over-blown killing spree depicted in the volume one. The first volume exists within a cycle of violence grounded in a history of film that is set before an audience that can delight itself in the cycle of violence being depicted. Once this cycle has been exposed as it is in volume one, the Bride cannot function as efficient or as effectively. The force that propels the Bride through her combatants and the belief in the rightness of her cause has been diminished if not demolished. Tarantino communicates this shift most brilliantly by having Budd killed not by the Bride, but by a black mamba, the moniker under which the Bride worked when a member of the Deadly Vipers. "The Bride," that is, the persona born in the chapel, whose tale seemingly shapes the entire film, begins to give way to other, more stable personas for this character (Black Mamba, Beatrix Kiddo, Arlene Machiavelli, etc.). This convergence becomes the clearest

condemnation against the violence portrayed in the film and the direct impetus for the conversation that ensues between Bill—the only person in the film who can identify each of the Bride's personas—and "his girl."

Rather than disrupt the film's attempt to exist as some ideal within the cinema house as Le Cain charges, Bill's discourse initiates the type of cultural dialogue over the history of film and its adherence to reciprocal violence that *Kill Bill* makes possible. For Bill's comments to work in this way, audiences must own the extent to which the violence depicted on screen is not screen violence but an actual violence present in their every day life. Bill's comments over Superman and Clark Kent help audiences make this leap. The Bride is for the film what Clark Kent is for Superman: a parody of what Superman sees when he looks at the world around him. Tarantino creates in *Kill Bill*, as the history of film before had done before him, a parody of what film makers see when they look at the world: a world fully invested in reciprocal violence. The Bride, of course, fails to see this. She is not meant to see it. Her role is to execute the violence she must commit, which she initiates with her declaration to Bill, "You and I have unfinished business." The real "unfinished business" of the film is critical discussion of all that *Kill Bill* has revealed. For *Kill Bill* to work in the way that I claim it does, that is, religiously, opening the way to critical discussion over the depiction of the ways in which humans live, the film's congregants must recognize themselves in the cycle of

violence depicted in the film and the history of film it synthesizes, discuss their involvement in the cycle of violence these films seemingly celebrate, and begin to imagine alternative social structures.

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[1] Maximilian Le Cain, "Tarantino and the Vengeful Ghosts of Cinema," *Senses of Cinema*, 32, July-September, 2004, p. 1.

[2] Le Cain, p. 3.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Le Cain, p. 7.

[5] Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the* Movies (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 193.

[6] Peter Travers, "Kill Bill Vol. 2," *Rolling Stone*, October 9, 2003

[7] Peter Howell, "Kill Bill: Vol.2," *Toronto Star*, April 16, 2004

[8] Roger Ebert, "Kill Bill, Volume 2," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 16, 2004

[9] See for example, Mark T. Conrad, "Violence as Therapy, or: How to be a Dick," *Metaphilm*, November 12, 2003

[10] Miles, p. 14.